

From the jaded and tired to the sublime.
by Peter Stone Brown

Neil Young, *Are You Passionate?* (Reprise)
Elvis Costello, *When I Was Cruel* (Island)
Warren Zevon, *My Ride Is Here* (Artemis)
Steve Earle, *Sidetracks* (ESquared/Artemis)
Van Morrison, *Down The Road* (Universal)

In an interview 11 years ago in *Songtalk* magazine, Bob Dylan commented, "The world don't need any more songs," and went on to say, "There's enough songs. Unless someone's gonna come along with a pure heart and has something to say. That's a different story."

All of the artists reviewed here have had something to say and written songs with a pure heart – the songs that hit you deep inside. At a time when the major labels have dwindled down to a few companies, all under the control of huge corporations that originally had nothing to do with music, and that not only the venues these musicians play in, but the radio stations are run by a single corporation, one has to wonder if songs are being written and albums are being made with other considerations in mind than the inspirational muse.

On *Are You Passionate?* Neil Young joins forces with Booker T. & The M.G.'S (minus guitar ace Steve Cropper) on an album that ends up posing its own question: what was he thinking?

Many of the songs are based on time-honored soul grooves. The opening riff of the first track "You're My Girl" is a slowed-down copy of Booker T.'s 1969 hit, "Time Is Tight" capped by a blazing Young solo, but instead of charging forward, once Young starts singing, the whole thing falls flat, despite a valiant effort by bassist Duck Dunn.

And therein is the problem. There is no doubt that the M.G.'S are one of the tightest bands ever, consistently playing with precision and soul. But what made the great Stax-Volt soul hits of the '60s – and the MG'S played on most of them – was a powerhouse singer provided the action. Young simply doesn't have the vocal chops to pull it off. This is particularly evident on "Differently" where each verse ends in a call-and-response with the backup singers leaving plenty of room for the lead vocalist to improvise. Young's answers to the backup singers are devoid of any spirit. Listening to the propulsive yet subtle groove, it's easy to imagine what a shouter like Wilson Pickett might have done.

Also not helping is these songs are hardly Young's most stellar compositions. Most of the songs seem to be about some sort of romantic

breakup, but the performance is so lacking in passion that it's hard to know if it's real or imagined and if Young wrote them because an album was due and felt he had to have new material.

"Let's Roll," his September 11th song rudely interrupts this snooze-fest. Borrowing the guitar riff of Aerosmith's "Last Child," and based on the words of Todd Beamer's final cell phone call, before he led the attack on the terrorists on Flight 93, as a song it fails miserably. In concept, it was a great idea, but despite ominous guitar work, it neither scares the shit out of you nor inspires.

Then it's back to the dreamy title track, which has nice piano by Young, but he sounds like he's ready to fall asleep. The strange thing is his guitar playing is always on and I can't help speculating if perhaps this album would've been more successful if had been all instrumental. The one exception is when Crazy Horse suddenly appears on "Goin' Home," a fairly standard Young song, but the contrast in energy is a bit too evident.

When I Was Cruel is **Elvis Costello's** first non-collaboration album in seven years. Backed by the Attractions, it's supposed to be some sort of return to something, possibly rock and roll. Costello has called it a "rowdy rhythm record," and at times it is. Costello also has said that he "used a highly skilled team of musicians and engineers to ensure that we did not accidentally make a record that had been previously released." If that's the case, then he succeeded too well. At times the arrangements are so deliberately strange such as the voice that chants "one" throughout the title track that whatever meaning or heart the song may have had is lost.

Basically Costello's problem is he is too smart for his own good. He constantly relies on a cynical cleverness over emotion and his dense wordiness makes it hard to care. Occasionally brilliant lines leap out at you, but it's too much work to go back to the beginning and find out if he is actually singing about something.

The opening track "45" kicks things off to a rocking start reminiscent of his early work, but the arrangement of the next song "Spooky Girlfriend" totally overdoes it, making it seem that Costello can't resist using every idea that comes into his head. "Tear Off Your Own Head (it's a doll revolution)" kicks along nicely, though the song itself, despite fairly perverse lyrics is ultimately meaningless.

Costello has two ways of singing: loud angry anguished whine, and softer angry anguished whine. It's cold, calculated and even worse comes off as a private joke. Either way, the intensity level always seems to be on maximum which gives his songs a false sense of urgency making them appear to be more important in subject matter than they actually are.

Ultimately it is frustrating because at every turn he lets you know he really could expand the scope of pop music lyricism.

Sometimes he does take the time to get real as on "Alibi," truly letting loose on the chorus: *But if I've done something wrong there's no 'ifs and buts'/'Cos I love you just as much as I hate your guts.* And at other times he either comes up with something catchy ("My Little Blue Window") or a searing riff ("Daddy Can I Turn This") but has a hard time resisting his compulsion to lay it on thick.

The most adventurous track is "Episode of Blonde," where Costello takes the roll of a mad barker narrator while the band combined with truly crazed horns sounds like a perverse carnival midway. While you may not take the time to find out what he's singing about, for once you can feel what he's singing about. At the same time, when he fades out the song while still shouting out the words, you're left wondering if it's just some cruel joke.

The sad thing about it is Elvis Costello does know better. Read any interview with him where he talks about music and all his influences are people who either sing or play with heart and soul. Why he insists on making his own albums overlong exercises in massive, over-intellectual self-indulgence remains a mystery. Just as perplexing is when performing in concert, the feeling of seeing an artist who takes himself too seriously totally dissipates.

Warren Zevon on the other hand doesn't appear to take himself seriously. On *My Ride's Here* he collaborates with a bunch of writers including Hunter Thompson on a jaded collection of songs that too often reeks of self-parody. On the surface it sounds like a Warren Zevon album - the music ranging from hard rock to Celtic-influenced ballads - with the usual parade of Zevon characters involved in crazy and dangerous scenes. Despite this there's little that goes beneath the surface. It's almost as if he's decided that the idea of creating anything meaningful is a totally futile exercise. He mentions both Russell Crowe and Charlie Sheen in a manner that suggest he doesn't expect these songs to last, but at the same time Lord Byron, Albert Einstein and Mata Hari also turn up.

To his credit, Zevon is funny about it, even when he instigates a wince by rhyming haystack with day Jack. Even when he's not trying he manages to be moving whether in the arrangements such as the use of Celtic fiddles on "Lord Byron's Luggage," and in his vocals.

The collaboration with Thompson, "You're A Whole Different Person" really doesn't work at all. The best line they could come up with is "Dangerous Creeps are everywhere," and the song tries to sound scary without being scary. Things are pretty bleak when the most enjoyable song "Hit

Somebody," a collaboration with sportswriter Mitch Albom about a loser bully hockey player who can't even be conscious when he finally scores a goal, with David Letterman shouting out "hit somebody" on the chorus is the best Zevon can muster. The most honest moment on the album is the second verse of "Genius" where his apparent bitterness at the music business slips out in the second verse: *There's a face in every window of the songwriter's neighborhood/Everybody's your best friend when you're doin' well -- I mean good/The poet who lived next door when you were young and poor/Grew up to be a backstabbing entrepreneur.*

In the end, the jokes fade away, the sly writer's tricks and revisiting of old themes don't add up, making Zevon's disenchantment with his muse a bit too obvious.

Steve Earle on the other hand isn't about to let disenchantment or the music business stand in the way of his music. *Sidetracks* is a collection of songs that for one reason or another didn't make it onto albums. In the notes, Earle refers to them as stray tracks instead of outtakes, since some were written or in the case of the cover tunes, recorded for films and other projects. Either way this collection of songs which ranges from originals including an Irish fiddle tune to a fairly crazy selection of covers that includes reggae, psychedelic, Nirvana and Dylan works. It's an album in the old sense of the word: a collection of songs instead of a grand statement.

There is no doubt that Earle is having fun on a lot of these songs, whether dueting with Sheryl Crow on the Chambers Brother's "Time Has Come Today" or rocking hard on Kurt Cobain's "Breed."

The originals include "Some Dreams," written for the movie *The Rookie* which is classic Earle in the rock country vein, and a different than previously released version of "Ellis Unit One" from *Dead Man Walking* featuring the Fairfield Four on backup vocals that is every bit as intense.

After paying tribute to Lowell George's "Willin'" and the Flying Burrito Brother's "My Uncle," Earle winds things up with a slow, building version of Dylan's "My Back Pages." Earle's is a scratch vocal - the released version featured Jackson Browne and Joan Osborne, and he sounds somewhat strained. He explains in the liner notes that the key was out of his range, and jokes that he sounds like his head may explode at any second. I couldn't have put it any better and while initially it was somewhat disconcerting, it's ultimately effective.

For about the past ten years, when not doing special project albums with other artists **Van Morrison** seemed to be making the same album again and again. It seemed that one could almost write the generic Van Morrison

song the way one could write the generic country song. Van has three types of songs: the I was in the garden wet with rain listening to the radio in the alley song. The I was lost in the rapture of Yeats, Blake or the poet of your choice while wandering in the garden wet with rain while my Telefunken blasted into the alley song. And the complaining song which is basically I was screwed by the business men, the press and the morons on the internet who think they know about me but won't leave me alone because they're all idiots wearing fashionable clothes and following the current trends which has nothing to do with the glorious rapture while listening to Sidney Bechet and reading Wordsworth while searching for the eternal eternal vision of John Lee Hooker jamming with Ray Charles in the Celtic mist song.

Down The Road may touch on familiar Morrison themes, but it is definitely a new album and may be his best work since *Hymns To The Silence*. With Morrison it's a matter of finding the groove and how he sings. He sounds not only revitalized but alive, tough and totally in the groove. Musically he's leaning on the blues, but wanders frequently into jazz, country, swing and as well as Celtic-flavored tunes. This is of course typical Morrison territory, but there's something about this album that's totally refreshing in the same way *Moondance* was refreshing more than three decades ago.

Only Morrison could use what is essentially a Jimmie Rodgers framework to write a song about missing Ireland, "What Makes The Irish Heat Beat," complete with an Irish, not a country fiddle and make it work. That he follows it by moving effortlessly into a totally swinging "All Work And No Play" blowing a mean alto sax solo along the way somehow makes perfect sense.

Among the standouts on an album of standouts is "Whatever Happened To P.J. Proby," another swing tune with a structure reminiscent of "Fever." Morrison uses the specter of faded British rock stars to make a strong comment on contemporary culture singing: *There's nothing to relate to anymore/Unless you wanna be mediocre*. In the last verse he turns the question on himself: *Whatever happened to all those dreams a while ago/Whatever happened way across the sea/Whatever happened to the way it's supposed to happen/And whatever happened to me?*

At the beginning of the '80s Morrison began to create a sound that was distinctly his own. Using whatever he needed whether a string section or horns, it wasn't rock, blues or soul, but something that used all those elements to achieve a higher musical plane. It had nothing to do with anything else that was happening at the time, in fact it deliberately ignored any contemporary trend or sound and took the listener to another place. That sound is represented here by "The Beauty Of The Days Gone By," which has the most heartfelt vocal on the album.

The most unexpected song and one that shows that Morrison's writing skills are totally intact is "Man Has To Struggle," where he takes on the entire human condition with startling clarity and a great deal of humor. While much of Morrison's work for the past two decades has had a strong spiritual context, several lines suggest he may have abandoned that line of thought: *Man was told that he was born in original sin/By people long ago that were conning him/Man is so out of touch he can't trust himself/But man's still got to win by cunning and stealth.*

The album concludes with one of the most beautiful songs Morrison has written, "Fast Train." Playing acoustic guitar and harp, and backed by bass, drums, organ and a perfect slide guitar by Johnny Scott, it's sad, soulful and everything a Morrison song should be.

Whatever that mysterious place is that the songs that stay with you and become part of your life comes from, Van Morrison tapped into it this time. His totally convincing performance shows that he knows it too.